

## PART 1

### Introduction to the project

I started this project with the intention to find a way of engaging with the Tasmanian landscape that would result in a visual communication of the experience of being in the land, rather than looking at landscape. I wanted to refer, with caution, to a 'natural' environment. Simon Schama, in his book *Landscape and Memory*, states that there is, on the whole of the earth, not a single natural system that has not been substantially modified by human culture and that 'it is this irreversibly modified world ... that is all the nature we have'.<sup>1</sup>

However, I believe I have found a place (and there are others) where in this present period nature, at an elemental level, is mostly left to its own devices and can follow its 'own compulsions'<sup>2</sup>, alongside and over layers of traces of cultural impact. The balance here has shifted from the hegemony of humans to a predominance of other than human life forms. As a human, I am a visitor and I feel that I can tap into this current 'natural' system.

Remnants from the cyclical workings of nature's compulsions have informed my contemplations and have provided the material for the construction of my visual language. The language I have devised is based on a phenomenological approach to transcribing and transpicturing the experience of being in place in time – of *Dasein*, in Heidegger's terms.

I have argued, that by refraining from using a photographic camera and the monocular vision of the camera, and accordingly a Cartesian perspectivalist perception and representation of landscape or the environment concerned, I have been able to employ the photographic medium in a more experiential manner. My way of constructing my visual language has relied on my physical presence in the land and on a comprehensive sensual experience. The working methods I have used have been based on walking, observing, touching, collecting, recording, deciphering, and assembling. The work has evolved from an intimate personal connection with a place without directly referring to myself. My chosen place has been Maria Island.

### Why Maria Island

When friends first took me to Maria Island quite a number of years ago I expected naively to find a 'genuine' Australian natural environment. These expectations were soon dispelled. While the exoticism of herds of kangaroos grazing in bright daylight and freely foraging emus impacted strongly, I also found myself transported back to childhood experiences in the country in

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, Fontana Press, Great Britain, 1995, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> John Szarkowski, *American Landscapes: Photographs from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*, MoMA, NY, 1981, p. 5.

Germany: willow groves, pine trees, a lonesome magnolia, jonquils and daffodils; strolling over gently rolling grassy hills. The restored and dutifully labelled 'historic' buildings and the equally interpreted ruins completed this Arcadia at the end of the world.

The at once thrilling and disturbing encounter of the alien and the familiar and the sense of time and space warping, which this initial visit had provoked, took me in 1999 for an 8 weeks residency to Maria Island. Those weeks of much solitude, walking, silent working and occasional talking to animals, plants and wind, as well as working trips to the island since the residency, have prompted me to locate my PhD project on and about Maria Island.

The fact that Maria Island can be accessed by boat only, that it is a confined and in that sense an imaginable entity has contributed substantially to the attraction of the island as the exclusive site for my project. Since the island was declared a National Park in 1972, humans have inhabited the island only in a care-taking role. National Park rangers live there during working shifts. Visitors stay for short periods of time only. There are no shops, no cafes or restaurants.

The sound environment of the island is unique, without motorised traffic (except for a small number of motor vehicles used by the rangers and the occasional sound of the motorised ferry). The silence can be profound. Even the intervals between animal noises can be long at some times of the day and night. The ear becomes alert to any change in the auditory space and to the murmurs and rumbles of ones own body and mind.

While there are many designed walking tracks on the island, large areas of the terrain allow random wandering and rambling. An area of a square kilometre can reveal remarkable riches and easily occupy a day of working – walking, looking, observing, note-taking, collecting. Standard cartographic representations where land essentially exists as a two dimensional surface become questionable.

Part of my deepening relationship with the island is a better understanding of its geographical and geological position in relation to the rest of Tasmania and an appreciation of the histories of the island which have been recorded over the past two hundred years. These histories have left traces and I connect to and use these traces in my work in a selective manner.

Early explorers' accounts describe in both words and images first encounters with the topography, the flora and fauna; and meetings with the Aboriginal inhabitants. Colonisation occurred with the establishment of penal settlements during two periods in the first half of the 19th century, and the two short lived but illustrious industrial periods as well as phases of farming in the times between.

With the declaration of the island as National Park a gradual evaluation of the remnants of these different historical periods has taken place. Buildings and ruins are being maintained and form an important aspect of the attraction for visitors. However, these landmarks occupy only a small portion of the island.

National Park rangers monitor the population of some introduced animal and plant species to assist, as it were, the island in finding its new ecological balance. I sense my experience of the island as witnessing the closing period of a cycle. The turbulence of events over the past two hundred years has calmed; has become history that is being reflected upon. Projections for 'new developments' for the island loom on the horizon.

The records from the Baudin expedition, with eight days in February of 1802 around and on Maria Island fascinate me especially. Reading Francois Peron's journal entries<sup>3</sup>, I can picture the described location, I can associate with the excitement and the apprehension of discovery. Yet an often intense blanket of melancholia mediates my excitement when I am on the island. I will not meet representatives of the old culture nor their burial sites. I may crouch against the white painted cairn at Return Point to shelter from the southerly wind and look across to Lachlan Island (formerly Isle de Repos) and imagine a reed canoe coming towards me.<sup>4</sup> I can stand at Bloodstone Point and sense the ritual importance this place had in the past as a major location for the collecting of ochre.<sup>5</sup> But, the closest I will get to that past is stumbling over the odd midden.

My mission is not to discover and explore a new continent for the aggrandisement of king and country and the progress of humanity – yet, I am conducting a kind of mapping; attempting to decipher a snippet of Australia, now. The buildings and their remnants do not interest me for this work. My method of recording concentrates on the land and particularly the ground. I like to believe that the ground is a repository for history and memory, and the residues of plants and animals which I gather bear witness.

### ***The question of terminology***

Nature, land, landscape, wilderness and environment were terms that demanded to be dealt with from the start of the project. I conceded that I would use all of them.

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<sup>3</sup> See Peron: 'Voyages de Decouvertes aux Terres Australes – Maria Island' in *Baudin in Australian Waters*, edited by J. Bonnemains, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Return Point on the West Coast of MI marks the place of shortest distance between Lachlan Island and Maria Island. Aborigines used Lachlan Island as a stopover place on the sea journey across Mercury Passage from mainland Tasmania to Maria Island.

<sup>5</sup> Bloodstone Point is an outcrop of Tertiary Laterite at the south-west end of the northern part of Maria Island. Aborigines had collected ochre there for ceremonial purposes over centuries.

On Maria Island I encounter 'Nature as primordial force' and 'nature as referring to daisies, rocks, waterfalls, mountains'.<sup>6</sup> There is land per se, the solid mass of the island, protruding from the ocean, rich in geological history and features. When I walk, set foot in front of foot, I am most aware of land. When I scan the horizon, look out for the weather, assess my position in relation to a major landmark or 'take in the view', I deal with landscape. I may be reminded of how early explorers saw this landscape and how colonialists organised it. Interpretation notes and my cultural conditioning will suggest to me how I should view it now; landscape as 'designed by human beings'.<sup>7</sup>

When I leave the designed tracks, areas of human habitation or regular visitation, I can sense moving into wilderness. I am aware of Simon Schama's statement that 'wilderness does not locate itself, does not name itself'<sup>8</sup>, that it requires to be named and designated as such, usually by a government. But I feel that the laws that govern here, off the beaten track, are oblivious to human wishes and needs. My experience of wilderness connects to Nature as primordial force and environment as ecological system. It is a place (and a state of being) where I am conscious of the complex working of forces, that are indifferent to my presence. As Barry Lopez qualified, '... perhaps the most essential attribute of wilderness [is] – falling into resonance with a system of unmanaged, non-human-centred relationships ...'.<sup>9</sup>

### **The central aim**

The central aim of this project has been to develop a photographic language that could address landscape without being bound by the convention of landscape photography and its contingent distancing view.

### ***The visual investigation***

The aim of my visual investigation has been to communicate an intimate, reciprocal relationship with the land and my experience of being in an environment, in particular that of Maria Island. The development of the project has relied on activities in two locations – the work during field trips on Maria Island and the work of translating the gathered experience and material into images in the studio and darkroom.

Being in time in place, on Maria Island; walking, dwelling, touching and collecting have been of key importance to my manner of gathering information and to my way of making images. The exploration of a range of methodologies and techniques has led me to abandon the photographic camera and its perspectival vision. Instead of depicting totalising views,

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<sup>6</sup> Estelle Jusim & Elizabeth Linquist-Cock, *Landscape as Photograph*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, p. xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Gina Crandell, *Nature Pictorialized*, John Hopkins University Press, USA, 1993, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Schama, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Barry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground*, Picador, London 1988, p. 82.

landscapes, sublime or picturesque scenes, I have employed the technique of the photogram and the technology of the digital scanner to make images of traces of fragments from the land. These traces have become the ciphers for my language of interpretation and are the material link to the land and my experience of being there.

### ***The exegesis***

The visual investigation has been informed by research into an area of philosophy that has challenged my thinking and has supported the more intuitive experiential and expressive component of my working process. I have conducted a brief and purpose-guided examination of Cartesian Perspectivalism in comparison with a phenomenological approach to perception and visual representation. This constitutes the theoretical context of my project and Part 2 of this exegesis.

In Part 3 of the exegesis I have addressed the visual context by looking at the works and working methods of a number of artists, past and contemporary. The section starts with a reflection on the pervasiveness of the pictorialised view, based in Cartesian perspectivalism, and a discussion of image examples by Ansel Adams and Peter Dombrovskis. I then refer to main issues and methodologies that I have identified as belonging to a phenomenological approach: the awareness of being in place in time, the role of fragment and detail as indicators of a larger whole, the trace as material link to the experience of being, and the open visual format of the frieze. In this context I have discussed images by Lesueur, draftsman on the Baudin expedition and early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographer Karl Blossfeldt. I have referred to works by contemporary artists John Wolseley, David Stephenson, Tokohiro Sato, Hamish Fulton, Richard Long, Nikolaus Lang, Susan Derges and Harry Nankin. A comment on the open visual format of the frieze concludes part 3.

In Part 4 of the exegesis I have dealt with the development of the project; its beginning is a brief overview of past work leading up to its inception. I then describe the development of the project through its three phases in chronological order, ending with a summary of issues and methodologies that have been common to all phases. Part 5 addresses the resolution of the project and concludes the exegesis.

### ***The significance of the project and its contribution to the field***

The project belongs, broadly speaking, to the field of landscape representation and land-art. More specifically it relates to that field of interpretations of the land, nature, and the environment that aims to communicate a participatory relationship. I have identified what I consider to be strategies to effect this communication and have examined works by artists which reflect the application of these strategies. Accordingly, my visual context encompasses works that rely on the artists' physical involvement with a natural

environment, interpreted through a range of media including drawing, painting, photography, print making, text and installation art.

My investigation has resulted in two bodies of photographic images and text. The images represent traces of fragments from the land, imbued with personal experience. The text makes reference to the idea that the ground is the repository of stories, of linear and cyclical time. Both the material quality of the images and the text and their arrangement in the gallery space are important.

My original contribution to the field rests on how I have employed the two seemingly disparate technologies of the photogram and the digital image to materially engage with a natural environment, and to translate this experience with the use of two-dimensional components into a three-dimensional gallery environment.